

*INSS Insight* No. 1199, July 29, 2019

**Libya: A Violent Theater of Regional Rivals**

**Sarah Feuer, Yoel Guzansky, and Gallia Lindenstrauss**

**Three months into a renewed civil war, Libya has emerged as a violent epicenter of the struggle between competing Sunni camps across the Middle East. The current conflict has seen growing involvement of outside powers, including the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Qatar, Russia, and France – all of which see in the Libyan chaos an opportunity to advance their interests in this failed North African state. For Israel, the situation in Libya has significance, albeit indirect, in four respects: the impact of the Libyan turmoil on Egypt's stability; the possibility that Libya could emerge as a regional haven for violent Islamist groups; the likelihood that weapon systems supplied to the warring parties will spill out of the country; and the extent to which countries acting against Israeli interests could deepen their influence in the Mediterranean basin by consolidating their entrenchment in Libya.**

Three months into a renewed civil war that has already claimed more than 1,000 lives, Libya has once again become a violent epicenter of the ongoing struggle between Sunni camps vying for influence across the Middle East. In itself, external intervention in Libya is not new. With the toppling of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in 2011, countries in and beyond the region saw in the ensuing Libyan chaos an opportunity to promote their own interests in the emerging political order. Throughout the first round of fighting between 2014 and 2015, militias operating in the west of the country, some of which were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, received financial and military support from Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan. By contrast, militias operating in eastern Libya, under the nominal control of military leader Khalifa Haftar, began receiving financial support and weapons from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Haftar also received assistance from Russia, which sought to take advantage of the declining American and European influence in Libya to deepen its presence and influence in the Mediterranean basin.

To a large extent, the dividing lines in Libya have to this day remained unchanged, despite the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015, which marked the end of the first civil war and created the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. The intensity of the rivalries subsided in 2016 in the wake of the establishment of the largest province of the so-called Islamic State (IS) outside its core territory in Syria and

Iraq. But with the military defeat of the IS Libyan branch in late 2016, largely thanks to American and French air strikes, the dominant domestic factions returned to a UN-sponsored negotiation process aimed at reaching a political settlement, and regional rivalries once again came to the fore. Earlier this year, the UN negotiations registered progress insofar as the parties agreed to convene a national dialogue and hold parliamentary and presidential elections by the end of 2019. However, following Haftar's surprise attack on the capital in early April, ostensibly aimed at extending his control over the entire country, Libya descended into another round of fighting, and the current civil war has been characterized by a higher degree of external involvement.

An example was the July 3, 2019 airstrike on a migrant detention center east of Tripoli, in which at least 60 migrants were killed. The incident was first attributed to Haftar following reports that he had received arms from the UAE in violation of the 2011 UN arms embargo on Libya, but the Sarraj government later accused the UAE directly of firing missiles from a fighter jet. (Thus far, no party has claimed responsibility for the strike.) Indeed, the UAE is Haftar's main backer, providing him with weapons, training, and financing; he has used Emirati fighter jets and drones to attack targets linked to the Tripoli government; and there have been reports that the UAE launched strikes from Egypt and even established an air base there for its fighter planes.

The UAE support for Haftar's forces, alongside Qatari and Turkish backing of the militias operating in and around Tripoli, has mirrored the broader regional split since 2011 between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, which oppose the Muslim Brotherhood, and Qatar and Turkey on the other, which have continued to back groups affiliated with the Islamist movement. Indeed, Haftar visited Riyadh a few days before launching his April attack on Tripoli. Qatar, which in 2011 became the first Arab country to recognize the rebel government in Libya and then contributed (in addition to the UAE) six fighter jets as symbolic aid to the NATO operation enforcing a no-fly zone over the country, has reduced its direct military involvement in Libya and now principally provides financial and diplomatic support for Turkish operations there.

Beyond the dispute over political Islam, the Gulf states intervening in the Libyan civil war are also competing for status and influence in the region, with major economic interests at play. Chief among them is control of oil and gas reserves currently under the jurisdiction of Tripoli, which has a UN mandate to export the country's hydrocarbons. Libya has the largest oil reserves in Africa, and prior to the 2011 uprising it was the third largest exporter to Europe. Haftar's takeover of important oil fields since 2016 reportedly has been coordinated with the UAE and Egypt, which may be pocketing some of the profits.

With the latest round of fighting has also come increasing Turkish involvement. Ankara has economic interests in Libya related to the country's reconstruction and to contracts signed before the fall of Qaddafi. Beyond Turkey's support for elements close to the Muslim Brotherhood, Libyan exiles in Turkey have promoted an aggressive stance against Haftar. Ankara also attaches importance to Libya in the emerging balance of power across the eastern Mediterranean. Increased cooperation between Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece on the one hand, and between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece on the other, as well as the connecting points between these alliances, have heightened Turkey's sense of regional encirclement and elicited a relatively aggressive response from Ankara. Furthermore, instability in Sudan and the recent overthrow of Turkish ally Omar al-Bashir make events in Libya all the more critical for Ankara. Consequently, Turkey has provided the GNA with weapons, including drones and armored vehicles, and it has assisted in training forces acting on behalf of the government. Earlier this summer, six Turkish nationals working for a Libyan oil company were abducted by forces linked to Haftar, and the Turkish Foreign Ministry's forceful response prompted the relatively speedy release of the captives.

Alongside the increasing involvement of regional forces, Russia has continued to advance its interests in Libya. This past May, two Russian citizens were arrested in the country and accused of trying to influence the elections planned for later this year. (Given the current violence, it is doubtful those elections will take place.) If there has been an attempt to influence the elections, the revelation would signal a new dimension of Russian involvement in Libya, which until now was characterized mainly by the provision of military advisers, weapons, and financial support to Haftar.

In its drive to entrench itself in Libya, Russia has benefited from a retreating United States and a fragmented Europe. Following the 2012 attack on the United States Consulate in Benghazi, which killed the US ambassador, America dramatically reduced its engagement in Libya. Thereafter, it limited its role to providing rhetorical support for the UN-sponsored negotiation process and launching targeted military strikes against suspected terrorist training camps within the country. The official policy of the Trump administration has been to support the UN negotiations, while continuing the previous administration's policy of limited kinetic engagement. Shortly after taking office, Trump declared that he saw no role for the US in Libya beyond occasional counterterrorism operations. Recent reports claimed that Trump had given Haftar the green light for his April offensive in a phone conversation with the UAE and Saudi crown princes. Moreover, the US refused to back a Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire following the strike on the migrant center.

With the exception of a joint effort to train the Libyan coast guard to prevent migrants from reaching European shores, the European Union has not managed to devise a coherent or unified approach to the Libyan conflict. France and Italy, the European countries ostensibly most affected by the Libyan crisis, and especially by the flow of migrants seeking to enter the continent via Libya, are divided on which side of the conflict to support. The GNA in Tripoli has received rhetorical support from Rome, while Haftar has reportedly received French military support since 2015. Indeed, in recent weeks a number of French missiles were discovered in a weapons cache belonging to Haftar's forces.

In the present circumstances, it is unlikely that the situation in Libya will have a direct impact on Israel. Still, the ongoing crisis in the country could carry indirect implications for Jerusalem in four key respects: the degree to which the Libyan war undermines Egypt's stability; the possibility that Libya could become a regional haven for violent Islamist groups; the likelihood that weapon systems supplied to the warring parties will spill out of the country; and the deepening influence in the Mediterranean basin of Russia on the one hand, and Turkey on the other, through their continued entrenchment in the failed North African state.